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*Anwaruddin Choudhury, Near Gate No. 1 of Nehru Stadium, Islampur Road, Guwahati 781 007, Assam, India.*

### Chek Lap Kok – how important is it?

I write regarding David Dudgeon's letter about Chek Lap Kok (*Oryx*, **26**, 53), site for Hong Kong's proposed new airport. I led teams of professional biologists and field assistants in a 7-month comparative study of Chek Lap Kok and nearby islands during 1990–1991. The island was about 3 sq km and about 20 per cent marshland. The two mangrove swamps, albeit small, were excellent indeed, containing a *Bruguiera* now reduced to extreme rarity this far north.

All mangroves in China are tiny patches. The only two that compare in size are at Mai Po, Hong Kong, and Deng Zhai Kong, Hainan Dao. It is said that no mangrove at all remains in Guangdong or Guanxi Provinces except that at Deep Bay, adjacent to Mai Po.

Not one square centimetre of all South China is free from human impact. Chek Lap Kok, however, supported an amazing diversity of animals – at least three times more non-flying vertebrate species than are known from any other South China Sea island of comparable size. Dudgeon implies that our tally of 32 amphibians, reptiles and non-flying mammals was wrong. Voucher specimens for all 30 reptiles and amphibians are in the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard and both native mammals are in Peabody Museum, Yale. Chek Lap Kok was an amazing place.

*James Lazell, The Conservation Agency, 6 Swinburne Street, Jamestown, Rhode Island 02835, USA.*

*David Dudgeon responds:*

Firstly, I did not intend to dispute the count of 32 amphibians, reptiles and non-flying mammals. The original article in *Oryx* (**25**, 192) did not refer to reptiles and amphibians but to ter-

restrial vertebrates. Most of the vertebrates on the islands are birds and these are largely species that are widely distributed in the Territory. Secondly, the Chek Lap Kok mangrove stands are small, and are not the only (nor the largest) stands in the area (Lantau etc.) that contain *Bruguiera*. They could not be described accurately as 'excellent mangrove swamps'. Your assertion that Chek Lap Kok supports at least three times more non-flying vertebrate species than are known from any other South China Sea island of comparable size does not surprise me because of, (a) the proximity to Lantau (cf. island biogeography theory), and (b) the relatively large collecting effort undertaken on Chek Lap Kok compared with other islands in the South China Sea. Once equivalent effort has been put into the other islands we will be in a better position to assess their relative conservation value.

Unlike Lazell, I do not regard Chek Lap Kok as being especially important in the Hong Kong or South China context. There are other sites within the territory that are under threat of development, which are much more diverse biologically. With the exception of its role as habitat for *Philautus romeri*, I believe that Chek Lap Kok has less conservation value than Sha Lo Tung, Luk Keng and other sites scheduled for development.

*David Dudgeon, Department of Zoology, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.*

### To collect or not to collect – a conservation issue?

From their letters (*Oryx*, **26**, 52–53 and 119–121), it would appear that Dr R. Hutterer, Mr W. F. Ansell and Dr W. R. P. Bourne have either not read my earlier letter (*Oryx*, **26**, 52) properly, or else have totally failed to comprehend the point I was trying to make.

While, of course, I accept Mr Ansell's truisms that 'the way to conserve wild animals is to ensure that there is a viable population in a viable habitat' and that 'wildlife conservation requires knowledge of the species occurring and their biology', I strongly dispute his contention that 'collection of study specimens is